

Noronha, jewel of nature

by Michel Braunstein

If I were to tell you about a special place where no one locks their door at night, where crime is virtually nonexistent, where the number of tourists is intentionally restricted to preserve the ecological balance, and where each visitor must pay a daily fee of fifteen Euros (Approx US\$20) to protect the environment, would you think about Brazil? Probably not!

Yet, Fernando de Noronha, the tiny archipelago still resists the changes and other influences of the continent! The archipelago entails twenty-one volcanic islands and is located at three hundred and sixty kilometers (224 miles) from the closest coast of Brazil (Natal). Spreading over a total area of twenty-six square kilometers, it is located in the Atlantic Ocean near the equator (3° 51'S, 32° 25'W). The main island, the only one which is inhabited, is about ten kilometers long (6 miles) and up to three kilometers wide (1.8 miles). The archipelago has been seen a couple of months ago, in all the media, after the terrible accident of the Airbus flying from Rio to Paris.

Discovered in 1503 by the Portuguese, the archipelago was named after Fernao de Loronha who

received it as a gift in 1504 from his friend, King Manoel I of Portugal. However Loronha quickly forgot his present and never saw it at all.

Ruled by England, then France, and then by the Netherlands, the archipelago came again under the yoke of Portugal in 1737.

Mainly a prison colony, it was used by the U.S. forces as a military base during World War II and again in the late 50's and early 60's during cold war against Soviet Union. Since 1988, the islands have been open to tourism, eighty-five percent of which being of Brazilian origin. Over two thirds of the archipelago's total land surface is a marine national park classified since 2002 as part of the UNESCO world heritage.

There are no hotels on this preserved site but there are living units or "pousadas" in private

The visibility is outstanding, ranging from 25 to 45 meters. During the months of September and October, the visibility is at its best.

Nikon D300 - 2x DS125 - 10.5mm - F8 - 1/60 - ISO 200



View to the impressive peak rock, "Morro do Pico" from the beach





*During each dive, large stingrays are visible. This one at 42 meters / 138 feet depth.
Nikon D300 - 2x DS125 – 10.5mm – F11 – 1/60 – ISO 200*

homes. Infrastructure is very basic. A single seven kilometer paved road crosses the inhabited island. Buggies are commonly used as a means of transportation and allow driving outside the main axis.

The site's nature conservation is exceptional; it has a rich and varied flora and fauna. Non-governmental protection agencies for the study of various species are quite active on the island and entail projects such as: the Projeto Golfinho Rotador for the dolphins, the Tamar Project for the turtles, and other projects pertaining

to the study of sharks, birds and crustaceans.

Some environmental mistakes made long ago by the Portuguese can still be noticed today. For example, two different lizard species that were introduced to eat rats preferred eggs, chicks, and turtles that have just hatched; unfortunately it is now too late to reverse the process.

At sunset, whilst visiting “Baia dos porcos”, you can admire, the “Dois Irmaos”, the two renowned tiny sister islands. “Morro do Pico”, an impressive peak rock, is another one



*Tube sponges are frequent in Noronha
Nikon D300 - 2x DS125 – 10.5mm – F11 – 1/60 – ISO 200*

beach is rather difficult, including a hike down a steep cliff of fifty meters (164 feet) high if you wish to swim. Two ladders allow crossing a narrow opening between the rocks, followed by a large flight of stairs that leads to the beach. This is not easy but it is well worth the effort for both the experiment and the view.

“Baia dos Golfinhos”, the Bay of Dolphins is near the Sancho Bay. A large number of spinner dolphins (*Stenella longirostris*) swim together every morning at dawn. They come to the bay to seek shelter after a night of hunting before returning to their marine odyssey.

These spinner dolphins, or commonly named “golfinho rotadores” in Portuguese, are known for their spectacular jumps. They can perform up to seven spins during the same jump. An impressive amount of them can be seen from the observatory at the top of the cliff, some fifty meters above the sea.

Every morning, the employees of the “Projeto Golfinho Rotador” organization count the dolphins to monitor their progress. Daily, on average, three hundred and fifteen

of the local spots.

The main island is surrounded by sixteen heavenly beaches that are clean and almost deserted, making it almost impossible not to stop there.

“Baia do Sancho” is without any doubt the most sumptuous beach and is rated first in the Brazilian beach ratings. The water is crystal clear and the shoreline is bordered by dense vegetation. This is an ideal place for snorkeling. You can often see stingrays and turtles as well as other species.

Nevertheless, access to the



Noronha's huge volcano rocks
Nikon D300 - 2x DS125 - 10.5mm - F8 - 1/60 - ISO 200

dolphins reach the bay to breed, care for their young, or seek shelter from shark attacks. At times, you can even count up to two thousand dolphins. Noronha boasts the largest spinner dolphin density in the world, in a single place.

“Baia do Sueste” is at the other end of the island and sea turtles come there to lay their eggs between December and June. Nests are protected by the “Tamar Project” patrol (Projeto Tamar). You can see turtles throughout the year if you swim beyond the bay wave line,

equipped with a mask, snorkel and fins.

All year round, you can have great quality dives thought to be the most magnificent of the South American continent. The water has a pleasant average temperature of 26°C. The visibility is outstanding, ranging from 25 to 45 meters. During the months of September and October, the visibility is at its best. You won't find the coral or microscopic life as it exists in the Indian Ocean. The underwater world of Noronha is interesting mainly for

its volcanic rock formations, narrow passageways, tunnels and caves, making it a very special place. Marine species are generally very large and quite numerous. It is not uncommon to encounter dolphins underwater and if you miss them there, you can often see them swimming alongside boats.

The magnificent Sapata cave has a very wide entrance which with a little imagination makes you think of a mouth. A large grouper lives within the entrance and although it still appears to be quite young, it already weighs over a hundred kilograms (220 pounds).

Reef sharks and nurse sharks can be met mainly in the superb reef of Pedras Secas. Sometimes, during a night dive, you can even come across a turtle sleeping under a rock. There are many schools of fish and on occasion you can see manta rays and hammerhead sharks.

The “Corvette Ipiranga V17” wreck is that of a Brazilian Navy warship that sank in 1982 after hitting a rock that did not appear on any map. She drifted and sank during an eight hour stretch reaching the seabed at sixty-two meters deep (203 feet), in perfectly straight position. She remains in excellent condition.

Diving into the wreck requires Trimix, which can be relatively expensive, and requires very accurate preliminary training. On the wreck's

deck, there is still a heavy machine gun.

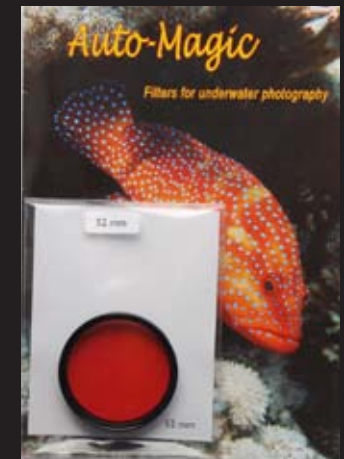
In the Noronha's port, there is another wreck which is accessible by snorkeling as it is only about 6 meters deep (20 feet). These are the partial remains of a Greek ship named “Eleana Stathatos” that sank in 1929.

Fernando de Noronha is a model of environmental preservation. The tourist industry remains limited due to the small infrastructure and means of access; there are only two medium sized planes landing there every day. This place has a unique charm as a result of all these factors and this makes it a true jewel of nature and a true delight to the eyes.

Michel Braunstein



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